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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001200

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBALLAH'S IMAGE MAKEOVER; A NEW APPEAL
TO THE ARAB WORLD?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William K. Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Local press reported on Hizballah's creation of an Arab relations portfolio, assigned to Sheikh Hassan Izz-al-Din. Hizballah explained to press that the new position was a product of periodic organizational restructuring. Expounding on his new role, Izz-al-Din said in an interview with a Kuwaiti newspaper that he will focus on strengthening communication with the Arab world, defending Hizballah's "realistic and true image of resistance," and supporting Iraqis and Palestinians. Local press speculated the decision had something to do with improving Hizballah's tense relations with Saudi Arabia. A contact at the Egyptian Embassy confirmed this, recounting how Hizballah's former external relations Nawaf al-Musawi had been demoted after irritating Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdel-Aziz Khoja with critical remarks during the May clashes. End summary.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESTRUCTURING...

12. (C) Local press reported on July 29 that Hizballah has started to reorganize itself, in part by creating an "Arab relations" portfolio, to be managed by Sheikh Hassan Izz-al-Din. Arab nationalist As-Safir wrote that the new position will focus on monitoring Hizballah's relations with different forces and parties in Arab countries and Arab governments. Further, it reported, a committee headed by politburo Sayyed Ibrahim Amine al-Sayyed will draft and propose a new vision and positions on local, regional, and international issues.

13. (C) In a July 31 interview with Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Ra'y, newly-appointed Izz-al-Din delinked Hizballah's reorganizing to the May clashes in Beirut, instead explaining that Hizballah reviews its organizational structure every three years, and concluded that Hizballah needed an Arab relations officer to meet an increased workload.

...IMAGE MAKEOVER...

14. (C) According to Izz-al-Din, the latest assessment focused on political relations in Lebanon and the relations with the Arab world, and Hizballah will now aim to defend its "realistic and true image of the resistance, especially in

the face of attempts to defame it." Downplaying Hizballah's relationship with Iran, he asserted that Hizballah is a Lebanese resistance and "no one can doubt our national, Arab, and Islamic belonging."

¶5. (C) Through the use of delegations, he said, Hizballah will strengthen its communication with Arab states on the official and popular levels. He added that Hizballah will also work on easing sectarian tensions in places such as Iraq and will focus on the Palestinian cause.

...OR APPEASING SAUDI ARABIA.

¶6. (C) Another media outlet, NowLebanon.com, hinted on August 1 that this was a demotion for Hizballah's external relations official Nawwaf al-Musawi. The portal speculated that the move was meant to appease Saudi Arabia, given that al-Musawi had been critical in the past of the Saudi government.

¶7. (C) In an August 8 meeting with PolOff, Egyptian diplomat Yasser Elwy, who regularly meets with Hizballah officials, confirmed the demotion of al-Musawi, revealing that this decision was made during the May clashes. Elwy relayed that, in May, al-Musawi made some harsh remarks against the Saudi government and Saudi Ambassador Abdel-Aziz Khoja. Khoja reportedly contacted a Hizballah official to inquire whether this was Hizballah's official position.

¶8. (C) After a few days, the official responded to Khoja that this was not the organization's official position, and to

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make amends, it would replace al-Musawi. To save face, Elwy recounted, the official agreed with Khoja that the personnel change would occur after two months' time. Elwy explained that this is why Hizballah announced the change at the end of July.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Hizballah's efforts to repair relations with the Arab community would seem to be a reaction to the recent visit by Saad Hariri, a Sunni, to Iraq. Hariri's visit played well with Shia audiences in Lebanon and he has said he will follow up with other actions to reach out to the Shia community. Hariri's focus on "Arab" Iraq highlighted the contrast with Hizballah's perceived closeness to "Persian" Iran. In response now, it seems, Hizballah is taking steps to improve relations with the Arab world. End Comment.

GRANT